DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 250 519 CE 040 044

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TITLE Instituting an Adult Degree Program at a Traditional Liberal Arts College: The Millsaps College Experience.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 13p.
PUB TYPE Reports -- Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Adult Education; *Bachelors Degrees; College Credits; *College Programs; Experiential Learning; Higher Education; Independent Study; Nontraditional Students; Prior Learning; *Program Development; *Special Degree Programs
IDENTIFIERS *Millsaps College MS

ABSTRACT

Millsaps College inaugurated an Adult Degree Program to compensate for the predicted diminishing number of traditional age students and to establish a degree program incorporating a number of innovations of value to working adults. Issues considered before implementing the program included the impact of such a degree offering on existing programs, the program's effect on Millsaps' reputation, the possibility that Millsaps' reputation as an academically demanding institution might be threatening to prospective students, and the effect of the tuition at Willsaps being substantially higher than tuition at public institutions. Millsaps was then selected as a grant recipient by Mary Baldwin College's Adult Degree Program Dissemination Project. To gain faculty support, a faculty advisory committee was appointed to work with the director of the dissemination project. The committee decided that a separate degree was desirable, non-graded credit for prior learning should be awarded, and the directed study option should be expanded in the proposed program. A Directed Study Agreement Handbook was developed, and the policy was established that faculty members directing independent studies should receive overload compensation. Eight months after the committee was formed, the Adult Degree Program, leading to a new degree--the Bachelor of Liberal Studies, was established. (YLB)

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INSTITUTING AN ADULT DEGREE PROGRAM AT A TRADITIONAL LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

THE MILLSAPS COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

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A sixty-two year old grandmother, a medical technology teacher in a university hospital, is back in school. The only thing that will prevent her from earning the degree she has always wanted is a funeral -- hers. A registered nurse, unable to attend college earlier because of family responsibilities, is now pursuing a degree plan flexible enough to accomodate her needs as a student. This permits her, the sole support of her family, to continue working full-time. Finally, a sixty-five year old department supervisor, a high school dropout, is now back in the classroom because, in his words, "My personal goals are based on the conviction that life, to have meaning, is a continuous process, especially in the area of learning. . . .To continue my education is not a spur-of-the-moment decision. It is an ambition that dates back for decades, but, up to this date, did not seem possible."

These three were among the first forty-four persons admitted into the Adult Degree Program at Millsaps College in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1981. Three years later, they and 110 others are on their way toward earning their degrees. Two have already graduated. It was the implementation of an Adult Degree Program that opened Millsaps' doors to these students, while at the same time expanding significantly the educational opportunities available to adults in the Jackson metropolitan area.

How did this happen? After all, Millsaps College, as it approaches its centennial celebration, is an institution steeped in tradition. It has always

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prided itself that a large percentage of its graduates earned advanced degrees or entered professional schools, while a disproportionately high number have distinguished themselves as Rhodes scholars, Woodrow Wilson fellows, and winners of Danforth Foundation awards.

Not only has a highly innovative Adult Degree Program been instituted at the College, but when the faculty voted on the matter, there was agreement that it was not simply desirable, but essential. An examination of the way in which it was developed and introduced may be of value to other traditional liberal arts institutions presently considering similar offerings.

Before taking any action toward implementing this program, hard questions were raised and answered honestly. Was a new program truly needed and, if so, could it be developed, given the resources of the College? Once in place, how would it affect the rest of the curriculum? Finally, what impact -- positive or negative -- would it have on that most important factor, Millsaps College's national reputation for high academic standards?

From an institutional perspective, there were certain inescapable facts. Demographic projections indicated that the number of 18-to-21 year olds in America had reached an all-time high of 17 million in 1980. Over the next decade, that number would inexorably decline to 13.5 million.[1] Private liberal arts colleges, especially in the South, were identified as those institutions most likely to be adversely affected by this trend. Since it is better to confront problems before they arise, 1981-82 seemed an especially appropriate time for Millsaps College to plan for its future. With enrollment at an all-time high and a balanced budget, the College was in a position to inaugurate new programs on the basis of strength rather than weakness. This was the right time for the College to begin looking for new groups of potential students to compensate for the diminishing number of traditional age students predicted nine years later.

But this was not the most important reason for pursuing a new program. Of far greater concern was this: In the Jackson metropolitan area, there existed no specific degree program that incorporated a number of innovations of value to working adults. No institution of higher learning in the vicinity had established the mechanism for awarding non-graded college credit to students presenting portfolios documenting college-level knowledge acquired outside the classroom. And while independent study was available at many local institutions, including Millsaps, its usefulness was limited.

Finally, traditional college programs are fairly rigid in their structure. For adults who have moved frequently and completed course work at a number of institutions, each with separate requirements, a greater amount of flexibility was needed.

It is also significant that Millsaps had already attracted a number of non-traditional students (defined as 23 years of age and older). Fall 1981 records showed that out of a student population of 1,141, there were 257 non-traditional students taking courses for credit. Further examination revealed, however, that the great majority of these were homemakers who, finding that their family responsibilities had diminished, could attend classes between 8 a.m. and 5 p.m. Those older students attempting to earn degrees at night, with the exception of those enrolled in the recently established Master of Business Administration program, were growing increasingly frustrated. Too few evening courses were offered because of the relatively small size of the Millsaps faculty (74 full-time professors) and their already heavy teaching loads. Many adult students had concluded that they would retire or die before they ever earned their Millsaps degrees. When all these factors were combined, there existed good reason for the College to move ahead.

Other questions remained. What impact would such a degree offering have on existing programs? Since the proposed Adult Degree Program would appeal to a

totally new market, it posed no threat to enrollment in traditional areas. How faculty would accomodate to the demands of these new students remained an open question. Finally, as for the effect such a program would have on Millsaps' reputation, there were no easy answers. That would depend to a large extent on the program's requirements, its overall construction and, most importantly, the quality of students attracted.

There were additional factors that required careful weighing. Millsaps' reputation as an academically demanding institution made it seem threatening to many prospective students. Since adults returning to the classroom are particularly susceptible to anxiety, the College's image had to be faced as a potentially negative factor. Moreover, as a private college, its tuition remains substantially higher than at public institutions. Even with all of these factors to consider, the Dean and Vice President of the College committed himself to bringing an adult degree program into existence. The greatest challenge he faced was convincing the faculty that it was needed -- no easy task. But he understood that without their support, such innovation had no future at Millsaps.

While searching for a starting point, he discovered that Mary Baldwin College in Staunton, Virginia, was spearheading an Adult Degree Program Dissemination Project through a Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) grant. If the project director could be convinced that a similar offering was viable at Millsaps, the College might become one of the grant recipients. The Dean submitted a proposal, and Millsaps was among the five colleges selected (the only one that was co-educational).[2]

Of greater interest was the project director's acknowledgement that, during her site visit, she had seen no evidence that Millsaps should be included. The Dean of the College had been in his position less than a year, a search committee was seeking an associate dean of continuing education, and there was little recognition among the faculty that an Adult Degree Program was either feasible or

desirable. Ultimately, Millsaps received its grant because the project director intuited that this was an ideal place for adult learning. Located in the capital city of Mississippi, a growing metropolitan area, the College was academically excellent, and there were no competing adult degree programs in the region.

Things began falling in place. A faculty member from another local college who had worked with adults returning to college indicated to the Dean her interest in developing an academic program for adults. The Dean subsequently offered her the position of director of the dissemination project. The newly hired associate dean of continuing education had directed an adult degree program at a Midwestern university, and now there were three persons at the College committed to the proposed program's establishment.

Realizing that the first task was to convince faculty that the proposed new program was in the best interest of the College, the Dean appointed a faculty advisory committee to work with the director of the dissemination project.

At their first meeting, the committee members expressed serious reservations regarding the task before them. A new degree program with greater flexibility and innovative methods for obtaining college credit appeared to threaten some of Millsaps' academic standards. The committee agreed that as the school was presently organized, it was impossible for most adults who worked outside the home to complete their baccalaureate degrees. At the same time, they acknowledged that some of their best students were the older persons in their classes. By the time the meeting was over, there was consensus that the entire college community as well as their own professional lives would be enriched if they could find ways to attract more adult learners. This was the first major breakthrough.

The second turning point came when committee members were invited to attend a Dissemination Project workshop at Salem College in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where the project director and representatives from each participating institution learned more about the salient characteristics of quality adult degree programs.

They met graduates from Mary Baldwin's Adult Degree Program and gained their first insight into the role this program had played in enabling adults to change their lives constructively. So persuasive were these former students that the Millsaps College representatives returned home convinced that a similar Millsaps program would represent no liability. Instead, the presence of adult learners in their classrooms would enhance the educational experience for everyone, young and old. These faculty members had become advocates for the cause.

It was one thing to be committed to the idea of a new degree program; it was another to construct it. Committee members met on a weekly basis to confront questions regarding program design. Should the new offering be a restructuring of the traditional Bachelor of Arts curriculum or should it be a separate degree altogether? What accomodations should be allowed to meet the needs of working adults? What innovative methods could be incorporated to expand the educational opportunities for this population? It became obvious that a separate degree was desirable, since one of Millsaps' strengths lies in its stringent core requirements, and the needs of many adults demanded more flexibility.

As for accomodations, the committee accepted the controversial concept that, where warranted, non-graded credit for prior learning should be awarded on the basis of the presentation of a portfolio assessed as worthy of such credit by the appropriate college department. There was fear that the Millsaps faculty would not accept this idea.

Here chance played a role. A Millsaps alumnus, now Professor of English at Mary Washington College in Fredericksburg, Virginia, had heard of the work of the committee and wrote them that the adult degree program at his institution had incorporated this feature with beneficial results. Since he often visited Jackson, it was easy to bring him on campus on two occasions. The first was informal; the second involved a two-day faculty development workshop.

In his presentation, the professor never apologized for his acceptance of awarding credit to adult students for college-level experiential learning. On

the contrary, he challenged the Millsaps faculty to confront a series of "uncomfortable questions" such as: "Can people learn outside the classroom what we teach in the classroom?" "Should a respectable college award credit for experiential learning?" To the first, he answered that if it were not possible to learn material outside the classroom, "What we do as teachers is irrelevant to human life." As for the second, he emphasized that colleges have a responsibility to "recognize genuine learning wherever it appears" and reminded his audience that "earning respect means giving respect."

Not everyone agreed. It was obvious that some faculty members would have to change their attitudes before this feature of an adult degree program could be successfully implemented. Traditionally, faculty function as authority figures, imparting knowledge to fairly passive, younger students. Now that special programming for adults was being considered, these same faculty would have to assume less authoritarian roles, more as guides, counselors, mentors or evaluators for persons who, in many instances, would be their peers. For many accustomed to traditional methods, the introduction of new ways of dealing with students brought about concern. Yet, at the same time, others who originally had dismissed the idea of awarding credit for prior learning were now willing to consider the possibility. For most Millsaps faculty, the concept was being seriously entertained for the first time.

Even if the idea of awarding credit for experiential learning were accepted, this innovation would not serve all the needs of adult students. Few would actually present portfolios, and when they did, the number of hours awarded would, in most cases, be small.[3] Other innovations were needed.

Many adult degree programs included a provision for contract learning or independent directed study. This was not new at Millsaps, but, before the inception of the Adult Degree Program, its use had been limited. The committee now sought to convince the faculty that the directed study option should be expanded in the

proposed program. Without the independent directed study option, adults who work during normal class hours could not meet degree requirements. This feature would prevent their dropping out in frustration. A more formalized procedure for making greater use of this method of learning was needed.

To accomplish this, the committee drew up a Directed Study Agreement Handbook based on the Mary Baldwin model, and they worked with the Dean to specify the responsibilities of faculty tutors. Many faculty members seriously questioned whether or not they had the extra time to meet the needs of adult students requesting independent studies. Their concerns were allayed once they received assurances that no faculty member would be required to provide this service. The committee realized that anyone unwillingly drafted for such responsibility would not be supportive of the program.

Finally, the policy was established that those faculty members who agreed to direct independent studies would receive overload compensation. In those cases where no Millsaps faculty member was available, the committee determined that properly credentialed tutors (master's degree or above in the desired discipline) could, with departmental approval and the consent of the Dean, be off-campus tutors. For many professionals living in Jackson who had earlier sought teaching positions at Millsaps when none were available, this program would provide new, although different, opportunities.

Seven months after the committee was appointed, the proposed Adult Degree Program had taken form. At this point, chance again played a role. Another Millsaps alumna, presently professor at the Center for the Study of Higher Education at Memphis State University, agreed to participate in a faculty development workshop on adult development theory and the life cycle. In her presentation, she asked the faculty to consider the implementation of the proposed Adult Degree Program in light of the College's history and purpose. Almost a century old, the school enjoyed a reputation as a fine liberal arts institution, one which had

openly questioned Mississippi's prevailing social attitudes during the period of integration.

Institutions, she suggested to her listeners, also have life cycles. Using Eric Erikson's theory that the three stages of adult development involve successfully achieving identity, then attaining intimacy and finally, in maturity, becoming capable of generativity, she suggested that this last stage was where Millsaps now stood. By offering the proposed program, the College could reach out and serve a whole new population. These students would find themselves, through education, capable of making productive changes in their own lives and in the lives of their families and communities.

But more than that, given the rich experiences and backgrounds of these students, new issues might be raised in established courses, introducing a new and deeper dimension into the classroom. The learning experiences for traditional and non-traditional students, as well as professors, would be greatly enriched. When she had completed her presentation, faculty members saw the proposed program in yet another light, and another turning point had been reached.

Encouraged by news that Yale University was also developing a similar program, the committee submitted its proposed Adult Degree Program to the Curriculum Committee.

Shortly after, the faculty was presented with the proposal -- an Adult Degree Program leading to a new degree, the Bachelor of Liberal Studies. A thorough and far-reaching discussion followed as final questions were raised. Committee members rather than administrators addressed faculty concerns; it was obvious that they were totally committed to their proposal, a fact that did not go unnoticed by their colleagues.

Eight months after the committee had met for the first time, the faculty voted in favor of the Adult Degree Program and the Board of Trustees approved the Program's establishment. After months of painstaking analysis, frequent meetings, and constant questioning, the Adult Degree Program had become a reality at Millsaps College.

What happened at Millsaps can happen elsewhere. While the program began as a "gleam in an administrator's eye," it was never promoted in that light. Instead, faculty and administrators served together on a committee designed to determine the college's need for this innovation. They were given information on similar programs elsewhere and the opportunity to meet with those administrators and students. Obviously, the college's involvement in a dissemination project was extremely helpful.

Once the committee members had raised and answered every conceivable question, once they had become convinced that the Adult Degree Program was genuinely needed, they were more effective advocates and crusaders for the Program's establishment than any administrator could have been. As they went back to their individual departments and divisions and faced the inevitable and searching questions, they gave thoughtful, persuasive and compelling reasons why the program should be adopted.

By this time, the entire faculty had been given the opportunity to learn more about recent developments in adult learning theory. Strong alumni of the College and administrators of successful programs elsewhere were brought in to lead these sessions. Since Millsaps is a small college with a small pool of alumni, it would seem reasonable to suggest that most institutions would be able to involve alumni, former teachers or administrators in such workshops or discussions. The value of doing so is obvious; they generally command greater credibility among faculty.

Looking back on all these developments certain moments stand out as especially important, times when questions were posed or new ideas introduced and turning points were reached. One of these occurred when a Millsaps alumna and administrator in adult education and continuing education from another school asked the Millsaps faculty to consider the proposed program in the light of the mission they sought for their institution. When she argued that by developing

this program, they would extend the educational opportunities for a whole new segment of the community, thereby enabling the school to become a more caring institution, she touched a vital concern. The program was on its way to winning acceptance.

Now that it is in place, it is the students themselves who continue "selling" it. Instructors teaching the introductory seminars (required of all students entering the program) are enthusiastic and enjoy stimulating discussions of "great books" and "great ideas" with these students. As for the students themselves, perhaps a local newspaper's article told it best when it carried headlines announcing: "New adult program at Millsaps making dreams come true." For those adult students who will earn the Millsaps degree so earnestly desired, this is a fact.

As these new students bring the wealth of their lives and experiences into the classroom, they enrich the entire college and add to the classroom experiences of traditional students as well.

For the College, its dream of continuing to grow and change in response to the new demands of this era, without losing its essential identity as a superior and demanding academic institution, is being met. Only six years away from celebrating its centennial, Millsaps College has reached out in a new way to the larger Jackson community. It can expect to enter its second century with a new sense of vitality brought on in large measure by the changing face of its student body.

NOTES

[1]Fred Hechinger, "Education's 'New Majority,'" Saturday Review of Literature, 20 September 1975, p. 15.

[2]The other four were Columbia College, (Columbia, South Carolina); Judson College, (Marion, Alabama); Sacred Heart College, (Belmont, North Carolina); Salem College, (Winston-Salem, North Carolina).

[3]Of far greater importance than the number of hours awarded is the fact that an institution of higher learning is willing to validate learning experiences outside the classroom. For many adults, this is extremely encouraging. Thus, the possibility of receiving credit for prior learning is almost unexcelled as a recruiting tool.